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Book Review "Sunjata: A New Prose Version"

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Citation

Jansen, J. A. M. M. (2017). Book Review "Sunjata: A New Prose Version". *Canadian Journal Of African Studies*, 51(2), 329-331. doi:10.1080/00083968.2017.1340240

Version: Not Applicable (or Unknown)

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).



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To cite this article: Jan Jansen (2017) Sunjata: A New Prose Version, Canadian Journal of African Studies / Revue canadienne des études africaines, 51:2, 329-331, DOI: [10.1080/00083968.2017.1340240](https://doi.org/10.1080/00083968.2017.1340240)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00083968.2017.1340240>



Published online: 30 Jun 2017.



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<https://doi.org/10.1080/00083968.2017.1340239>



Sunjata: A New Prose Version, by David C. Conrad, edited and translated, with an introduction by David C. Conrad, Indianapolis, Hacket Publishing Company, Inc., 2016, xl + 140 pp.

The Sunjata epic is an excellent source for studying and teaching African literature, oral literature, performance and theatre, history, and oral tradition. It is most often taught using Djibril T. Niane's 1960 edition of the epic in prose narrative (English translation 1965), although there are a number of verse translations in use, most of them American, which are faithful to griot performances of the epic. Among these is Conrad's (2004) own linear translation of the same text now published in prose. However, because these linear translations demand a fair degree of expert knowledge of griots and oral poetry, those text editions are rather less accessible than Niane's edition. With his prose translation of a 1994 recording he previously published as a verse translation (*ibid*), David Conrad has successfully explored a new strategy. This new prose translation has preserved both the literary aesthetic and the intimacy of a griot performance, while at the same time creating a very readable text. To me, this prose translation is – in spite of absence of some songs typical for the Sunjata narrative – an excellent visualization in print of a performance of the Sunjata epic, in all its complexity.

Conrad's text is based on a six-day recording session with Djanka Tasse Condé from the village of Fadama, in Northern Guinea. The recording's length forced Conrad to select crucial episodes for publication; he then connected those episodes with summaries of the passages he chose to omit. All the same, Conrad's selection is logical and supports the development and understanding of the story-line.

Djanka Tasse Condé (d. 1997) was the son of Babu Condé (d. 1964) with whom Camara Laye recorded the Sunjata epic in 1963 for his novel, *The Guardian of the Word* ([1980] 1984). Djanka Tasse's father and his senior brother Mamadi both served as *belentigi*, chief griot of the griots of Fadama, and Djanka Tasse himself was invested with the same function in 1994 after his brother Mamadi had passed away. In contrast to what one might expect of recordings made elsewhere among griot families, Djanka Tasse's narrative is strikingly different from Babu's – excepting that they both excel in literary creativity and freedom of interpretation. Djanka Tasse's narrative is very Condé-centric, attributing numerous deeds from the history of Manding to persons with the patronymic Condé. Perhaps the fact that the recording with Djanka Tasse was induced by David Conrad – local alias Daouda Condé – strengthened Djanka Tasse's preference to feature the Condé. Djanka Tasse suggests, for instance, that Sunjata's rival Sumaworo Kante was killed by the hero Fakoli, who in this version grew up under Condé patronage instead of being raised by his own mother (121). That claim would completely overturn the generally accepted history

of the Manding peoples, and Conrad rightly adds a note that it is not “careful”, explaining it away by referring to the private character of the recording.

Although I am impressed by Conrad’s translation of the griot’s text, I have mixed feelings about his Introduction, in which Conrad places his focus on the epic’s historical value. He argues that, while the narrative is phrased in “Mande epic discourse”, it tells of “famous ancestors who are remembered for important deeds that are *alleged* to have occurred around the beginning of the 13th century” (xiii, my italics). And, although here Conrad writes “alleged”, elsewhere he shows no reluctance to picture Sunjata as a thirteenth-century ruler (see, for instance, xxiii). Apparently, Conrad is not open to the idea that a narrative on Sunjata already existed in the fourteenth century and data about Sunjata was taken perhaps too literally by the contemporary Arab authors as being historically true.

As he is writing an introduction to a pocket edition of the Sunjata epic, Conrad may be forgiven for putting aside the scholarly discussion of the epic’s origins. Perhaps he simply considered the debate too technical, or even as undermining the greatness of the narrative. However, Conrad’s uncritical focus on the thirteenth century comes to illustrate a problematic heuristics when his appreciation for Djanka Tassej’s narrative is taken into account.

The main issue is that Conrad declines to analyze it as a contemporary voice. For example, Djanka Tassej’s version extensively describes Sumaworo, the antagonist of the Sunjata epic, and elaborates on Sumaworo’s quest for the Sosobala (64ss.), the sacred balafon (a kind of wooden xylophone) that is nowadays claimed to be owned by the griots of Nyagassola, in Northern Guinea. The report on Sumaworo is full of stories showing the historical importance of the Sosobala. Conrad notes that the Niane version stressed Sumaworo’s brutality and comments that: “This conveys a false impression of how Sumaworo is actually perceived” (xviii). In defence of Niane’s account, I would say it is to be expected that a griot from the late colonial society would naturally portray the antagonist as an oppressor. Regarding Djanka Tassej’s account, however, it should be noted that over the past few decades the griots in Northern Guinea have been actively re-evaluating Sumaworo. As a result, in 2001 the “Cultural Space of the Sosobala” was recognized as a UNESCO Masterpiece of Intangible Heritage (Simonis 2015). A few years after that, the griots of Fadama failed to acquire UNESCO recognition for their oral heritage.

The epic as recited in Nyagassola, home of the Sosobala, reveals a revision of Sumaworo’s role similar to that in Djanka Tassej’s account (cf. Kouyaté 2016). I had therefore expected David Conrad in his introduction to reflect on the cultural context in which he worked for decades with people who were actively redefining themselves and re-assessing their own knowledge. Hence, I am critical of Conrad’s choice to stay close, often literally, to the text that he wrote as an introduction to his 2004 edition; historical developments since then demand an updated interpretation of his recording with Djanka Tassej. And the current UNESCO status of the Sosobala traditions now questions the impact of Conrad’s project from 1994 – isn’t an investigation of the feedback of one’s own presence a standard exercise for any researcher involved in a project documenting oral tradition?

In the Epilogue (128) Conrad promises a “complete, exhaustively annotated scholarly edition” of “the entire corpus of discourse on the Condé perception of the Manding peoples’ history”. Those words confirm for me both Conrad’s faith in encyclopaedic informants, and his reluctance to analyze them as active brokers in a modern world. But, although the introductory section might produce mixed feelings in some readers, I believe wholeheartedly that this prose translation will reveal to them the beauty of one of the greatest works of mankind.

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<https://doi.org/10.1080/00083968.2017.1340240>



Authentically African: Arts and the Transnational Politics of Congolese Culture,

by Sarah Van Beurden, Athens, OH, Ohio University Press, 2015, xix + 372 pp.

This intimate account of a neglected aspect of Belgian relations with the Congo, before and after Congolese independence, can be read as a sequence of case studies answering the implicit question: how does anything become "art"? Artifacts from Central Africa were first collected and classified by the Royal Museum of Central Africa (RMCA, Tervuren), in its capacity as a scientific institution, as evidence that Congolese "tribes" belonged to a common level of primitiveness. Some artifacts, however, gradually became regarded as (primitive) art, mostly because of their association with the political centralization and supposed racial superiority of certain groups, notably the Kuba. Authentication of some artifacts, on the authority of the museum, as traditional or tribal art enabled Belgium to pose as guardian of an endangered past. At the same time, as part of its civilizing mission, administrators in the Belgian Congo encouraged the studio production of new artistic forms that would be appropriate to modern times but still authentically "African." New artistic expressions of "the Bantu soul," they hoped, would contribute to the development of a unified Congolese identity, thereby validating Belgium's paternal role. It is not surprising that few works of note emerged, given the stifling degree of social control exercised by the colonial government and infantilizing surveillance that its subjects experienced.

The unexpected arrival of independence questioned the continuation of a paternal or even avuncular Belgian role with respect to the "discovery," authentication, and conservation of Congo art. In the negotiations over decolonization, art came to be listed beside mineral wealth in a debate over who owned what; the possession of art, as Van Beurden puts it, depended on "the art of (re)possession" (100). To counter the demand that the holdings of the RMCA be returned to Congo, Belgium asserted that Congo art – no longer primitive or tribal – now formed part of the universal human cultural heritage. As negotiations dragged on, President Mobutu's new "policy of cultural authenticity" highlighted the political value of art as a component of national identity. Mobutu was particularly offended by the fact that an exhibition of *Art from the Congo* that toured the United States (US) in 1967 was organized by the RMCA, not by Congo itself. Belgium agreed to help build and furnish the Institute of National Museums in Zaire (IMNZ) based in Kinshasa (formerly Léopoldville) as a partner of the RMCA in conservation and research. Instead of representing a noble past, "museum objects now played a role in the making of the modern future of Zaire [formerly Congo] as a nation" (109). The new museum itself would be an instrument of modernization, educating citizens in the abstract appreciation of objects as "art" and as part of a unified "national" heritage (despite the Kuba king's objection to the museum's neocolonial role in appropriating "his" art). In practice, Mobutu's interest in culture past, present, and future did not extend much beyond the political value of *authenticité*, a slogan which thinly